"Did I Do That?"

ONE NIGHT years ago, the lights went out all over town. I was a new minister in rural Vermont. Two hours later I received a phone call in my darkened parsonage. It was one of my Deacons.

He wanted me to visit a family—let's call them the Browns—on the outskirts of town. He told me the Browns had a 16-year-old daughter named Debbie, a lovely girl, who had just been killed!

I was stunned! The phone froze in my hand. Apparently Debbie had been riding with her boy friend in his car when he struck a utility pole. Debbie died instantly; her boyfriend survived with little physical harm. That's why the electricity was off all over town. What a horrible night!

Back in seminary I had taken a ministerial test which showed that my desire to help people in crisis was so high that it almost went off the graph. I wanted to be a good, caring minister to my people. But, I was not prepared for this situation.

I could feel my stomach twisting. I wondered, "What could I ever say to those parents?" I thought of my own two little children, cute as buttons, who were then safely tucked away upstairs in their beds.

I got in my car and drove down winding gravel roads past aged red cow barns and split rail fences. As I drove, I asked God for help. Soon, I came to the Browns' little white house. I was told to look for the house with the rusty old tractor without wheels in the side yard.

The Browns were not church people. I had never met them before. Anxiety gripped my chest, like sharp claws, as I trudged through the darkness to their front door. A family friend let me in.
The Browns' humble home was bathed in pale yellow candlelight.
In the kitchen, up on the wall, their electric clock was still stopped.

There they were. The Brown family and Debbie's boyfriend sat around the kitchen table. Debbie's mother wept silently. The tears etched her cheeks. Debbie's father stared emptily into space.

Debbie's boyfriend was bent over in his chair; his youthful hands covered his face. And the younger Brown children all sat very quiet and still in their chairs, much too quiet and still for their age.

Speaking softly, I introduced myself as the new minister in town. I pulled up a wooden chair and sat with the family. Mostly, I was quiet. At times, I did try to speak some words of comfort, hope, and faith. But, what came out of my mouth seemed hollow, like platitudes which really had very little meaning.

I felt so inadequate. My heart ached for this family. What do you say to a family that is so grief-stricken? Finally, after about half an hour, I left the Browns' home. I had done my best. But, I still felt like a colossal failure.

I felt as useless as that rusting, broken-down, old tractor, which sat in their side yard. I drove back home in silence, under a mountain of self-doubt.

Several weeks later, I met Mrs. Brown in the village store. Tears welled up in her eyes as she told me this:

I want you to know how much your visit meant to us the night Debbie died. You helped us to carry our grief. You helped us see that our other children still needed us.

As Mrs. Brown spoke, I thought to myself, "Did I do that? Did I do that?" Then it dawned on me; God did that through me!

IT WAS homecoming day at a Maine high school. A teacher welcomed back one of his former students. That student,
named Peter, had since moved to another community and made a name for himself in the banking business. Peter was now both a financial success and a responsible town leader.

Although twenty years had now gone by, Peter was delighted to see his former teacher again. Seated in their old classroom, in the same old rickety wooden chairs, the two men began to talk and reminisce.

Suddenly, Peter pointed to the old chalkboard on the wall behind them and said to his former teacher:

Do you remember the day you suddenly walked into this room and caught me throwing a chalk eraser at one of my classmates? You kept me after school. I'll never forget that day. You talked to me like a caring father. You told me I had far more to offer the world, than just throwing dusty-old erasers around the room.

I should have written you a long time ago to thank you. I'm sorry for that. But, let me tell you now, that your words that day made a tremendous difference in my life.

You got me thinking seriously about my life for the first time. In fact, you set me on the path that led me to where I am today.

Peter's teacher blushed. He couldn't remember that incident at all. In fact, as his former student spoke, that teacher kept asking himself, "Did I do that? Did I do that?"

OVER THE YEARS of my life, I have made this discovery. Very often, the gap between our abilities and our accomplishments is exceedingly large. Quite often, our lives reap a harvest of blessings which extend far beyond what we could ever sow by ourselves alone.

But, how is that possible? Can a farmer plant twelve acres of corn and end up harvesting twenty-four acres?

Over the years, whenever I've been happily surprised and given cause to ask, "Did I do that?," a particular theme from our
Holy Bible repeatedly comes into my mind. And that theme is this. The things which are impossible with humans are possible with God, for God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

WE MODERNs live in an age which is well-schooled in the science of cause and effect. We know at precisely what speed a rocket must travel to escape the earth's atmosphere. We have machines which tell us the exact position in which to place a probe for delicate brain surgery.

Yes, we of the 21st century are devout believers in cause and effect. However, every so often, the cause and effect of our personal lives just doesn't add up. It refuses to balance. And we are prompted to ask ourselves, "Did I do that?"

Unexpected kindesses, vexing problems which solve themselves for seemingly no apparent reason, unprogrammed abundances in our lives and in the lives of those we love, all of those little pluses--or little miracles, if you will--have long been cherished by people of faith as the effects of God's grace in their lives.

As you may know, there's a certain school of religious thought, called Deism, which believes that God set the world into motion as a great machine or clock, and that soon afterwards, God left the world to run on by itself without God's interference or help.

In that view, if the world breaks down, runs out of gas, or self-destructs, too bad.

By contrast, and generally speaking, we of the Judeo-Christian tradition are Theists. We believe that God not only created the world, but that God also continues to enter our world in order to touch and strengthen our lives.

To use an analogy, we believe that God is like a skilled gardener who takes pride in God's garden. Like the skilled gardener, God walks among the people of God's creation, propping up this life, nourishing that one, trimming yet another one of its dead wood, so it may grow strong
and tall and bear good fruit.

In short, we believe that God cares for our world in ways our world cannot care for itself. As we all know, a garden without a gardener is disastrous. Weeds get out of hand and choke out life. And so we believe it would be in our world without God. Namely, without God, it would be all struggle with little prospect of winning even a corner of sunshine for ourselves.

Without God, people would reap exactly what they sow, no more and no less. Some might be pleased by the predictability of such a life. But I have to say, that I, for one, would be horrified, for quite honestly I just don't believe the human race is that strong, that wise, or that moral to survive under those conditions.

As weak and imperfect as we humans are, I believe we need every possible plus we can get, added to our life's equation. Simply put, we need lives that don't add up.

We need our God of love, who enlarges our limited efforts, who purifies our mixed motives, who strengthens our feeble hearts, who empowers us, even in the midst of our terrible feelings of inadequacy, to mount up with wings like eagles.

The fact of the matter is that our Holy Bible is filled with stories of God's grace at work in our world. The Bible is filled with people whose lives didn't add up. Perhaps you have noticed that amazement and astonishment are among the most common emotions in the Bible.

For example, the biblical people of Jesus' day were not only amazed by the signs Jesus performed, they also were amazed by themselves.

Far from living just tidy little lives of predictable cause and effect, the people of the Bible who trusted in God found themselves venturing and accomplishing stupendous things, which, otherwise, they never would have imagined accomplishing.
For example, there was Moses, who nearly quaked at the idea of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. As Moses said to God,

> Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh ... [besides] I am slow of speech and of tongue." [Exodus 3:11; 4:10]

Yet, by God's grace, Moses not only accomplished the unthinkable, he also brought his beloved people to the threshold of the Promised Land.

There was Isaiah, who expressed a deep sense of personal inadequacy. Isaiah questioned his own integrity. But through the strength of God's grace, Isaiah became a prophesying voice of holiness for his people.

There were the disciples, who fearfully huddled together in a locked room after the death of Jesus. Those disciples were emotionally broken and ashamed of their failure to help Jesus.

Yet, through the power of God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost, those disciples were transformed into great leaders of the Christian faith, who performed many "wonders and signs." Because of God's grace, all of those people lived far beyond themselves.

AND SO IT IS with us Christians today. There are moments when all of us register surprise.

--We are surprised by how far-reaching our personal influence for good can be.

--We are surprised by how even our small deeds of caring can grow into great deeds of love which transform the lives of others.

--We are surprised in difficult times by our own strength and courage and by our ability to endure.

It is well said, that the things which are impossible with humans are possible with God, for God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

WHENEVER YOU DISCOVER little miracles in your life, whenever you discover that you have lived far beyond yourself,
whenever you are tempted to ask the question, "Did I do that?," whenever those things happen, remember God's grace. Remember God's grace. And give thanks to our God, who blesses us every day with lives that don't add up!